

Q: Good afternoon. Today is July 2nd, 2016. My name is Zoey Gelch and I'm here at the Newton Free Library with Mr. Richard Aronson. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center.

What is your connection to Newton? If you have lived in Newton before and after your service, what did you miss most about home aside from family and friends?

A: Well, we've lived here about 10 years. Before that, we lived in Needham for about 40 years. And I didn't miss anything, as I like it here. Nothing to miss.

Q: What were you doing before you entered the service? Or what was life like for you before?

A: I was a student at Springfield College. And I got drafted in October, 1951. And I finished the semester and enlisted in January of 1952 in the Air Force. And I was in there three months—I'm sorry, three years, 10 months, and 22 days. We never forget it.

Q: Did you finish college when you came back?

A: Yeah.

Q: So how did you join? And why did you choose this specific branch?

A: How did I join? I went to the recruiting office. And I said, "You've got me." And signing up. And I like the Air Force because they had opportunities for a field I was interested in. So they sent me, after Basic Training, they sent me to dental school at Great Lakes. And from then I went onto oral surgery for the rest of my time. Very interesting. Next question.

Q: Okay. How did you adapt military life?

A: Easily, easily. I liked it.

Q: So what about the physical regimen, barracks, and food, and social life?

A: No social life, except after Basic Training. Let's see. From Basic Training I went to Great Lakes, where they had a dental surgery—I'm sorry, dental surgery program. And from there I went to Wichita, Kansas, which is like being out here, dry and flat and cold in the wintertime and hot in the summer. Socially, you went downtown Wichita. And all the bars, all the clubs, all the restaurants, like any other—what do you call—I'm sorry, major city.

Q: Did you make any friends there that you're still in touch with?

A: Oh I did, but I haven't seen him in over 60 years. No, that's a long time ago.

Q: Yeah. So how did you stay in touch with the family and friends back home?

A: Back then I stayed in touch two ways, with a three-cent stamp on an envelope and a letter and a telephone. They didn't have what they have at the present time. That did not exist.

Q: Yeah, how often did you talk to your family and friends or send letters?

A: Once every week, two weeks, I don't recall. It was a long time ago.

Q: So where exactly did you serve? And do you remember arriving and what it was like?

A: Yeah. Well, are you ready for a long story? Okay. Well one of my jobs was to identify pilots and crewmen who crashed, and being in dental surgery you had to go over and identify them by their teeth. So that was my job, not a fun job. Afterward, we sailed from San Francisco five days out in the ocean to Wright, Alaska. This is when it was a territory, not like it is at the present time.

We got on a wood-burning train and went from Anchorage to Fairbanks, about 500 miles. I was assigned to a building, a hospital, with no room for the troops. We slept in a cellar for six months until I made sergeant. And then I moved upstairs. It was very cold, 40 below every day. I finally got a chance to flying status. And you flew to places you never heard of, Unalakleet, Tin City. You've heard of Nome, which is right on the Bering Sea. And we had to take care of all the troops in that area.

The weather in the summertime in Nome was about 40 degrees, snow on the ground, not such a great place. So everyone who says, "I'm going to take a tour up there, or I'm not going," because it was—The weather was pretty bad, pretty bad. Now they've got—I'm sorry, yeah, Fairbanks is a major city, hotels, restaurant, bars, and clubs. When I was there there wasn't very much to do. It was a boring existence except when I was flying. And I'm trying to think of a lot of other things. I hope you edit this thing, anyway. I'm trying to think what I did. That's it. We just, all the men, they worked all day, went to the bars at night, came back, same thing, seven days a week, nothing to do.

Q: What was your favorite part of that?

A: No favorite part at all in being there. We went through two air raids because one of the jobs of the Air Force at that time was to guard against Russian aircraft over Siberia. So they were always on the alert. And I was ready to take a plane ride to someplace, and the whistles went off. And I had to drop everything and run into the air raid shelters. They still had them because they

were so close to Russia, and we were in the Korean War at the same time. And finally, December, 1955, it was all over. I packed my bags, back to school, like I never left.

Q: What are a few of your most memorable experiences?

A: I told you one, identifying pilots who went down, by their teeth. So that was probably the most memorable. All the rest were just day after day in the military, you know. But I'd do it over. But at 85 I don't think they want me. [laughter]

Q: So on a lighter note, are there any particularly humorous or exciting memories from when you were on leave?

A: Exciting memories? We wrote to each other. That was—We weren't married then, though. I can't think of any. I think I told you the highlights. Weather was bad from October through maybe May, very cold, ice and snow. You didn't go out too often except when they had a USO show come, and we went there. I can't think of anything exciting, you know.

Q: So do you recall the day that your service ended?

A: Sure. December 15th, I think, 1955. And I flew from Fairbanks to McCord Field in Washington. And got off the plane, and walked out, kissed the ground, I'm done. Grabbed a plane and back to Massachusetts. We're both from Springfield.

Q: What was the first thing you did when you came back?

A: I went back to school immediately. You know, like nothing happened, except I was five years older.

Q: Did you do anything with your experience from the military that helped you later on in life?

A: Say that again?

Q: Like did you do anything else with your experience from the military?

A: No, except I still am active in some organizations, the American Legion, the Korean War Veterans Association. I liked it. I think it's an important part of growing up. And I think it should be almost a requirement for young people, you know, men and women, you know. Let them serve. I think it'll be—And it's a learning experience and one you'll take forever with you throughout life.

Q: Is there one lesson or something that you've learned that stuck with you from the military?

A: Something that stuck with me? No, except I'm proud that I served. I've kept all my uniforms, got them all hung up. I even have my father's, my father's World War I jacket, which is a collector's item today. And he served, and we all served, in World War II as well, except Vietnam. My sons are a little too young for Vietnam, just 58. So you've got to be about 62 or 3 now, so he missed it, yeah.

Q: What was it like to return to civilian life?

A: Well, I was glad I was out. The military wanted me to stay in and train for the 1956 Olympic Games. I'm a gymnast. So they wanted me to stay in. But I said no, I had enough. I want to go back to school. And going back before I got drafted, my grades were terrible as a sophomore, and a freshman, I mean really bad. I was lucky to get a D average. That's pretty bad, isn't it? Yes it is. [laughter]

But afterward, I learned a lot. I grew up, you know, in the service. And after that, my grades went sky-high, you know, right off the roof. So it took that time to grow in the service. And remember that I had various responsibilities. We got married in 1957. And that in itself was a milestone, because I knew I had to provide for a family, which I did. But the service did teach you to follow orders, be independent as well, create certain facets of life that will carry you on forever. And I still have them.

Q: How did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: Well, I've answered a lot of that with prior questions. But what was the statement about war?

Q: How did your service affect your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: Well, war is no good. We all know that, you know. But in some cases, in that case we had to go. And you go where the military tells you. For example, I volunteered for Korea in the summer of '53. But I waited, and the orders say, "Uh-uh, we need a medic in Alaska." Well I didn't want to go to Alaska, but I went anyway, because I had to go. Otherwise I'd be in the guard house. I'd be in the jail, in the brig. And so you follow orders, and you learn that. And if you don't, you're out of the Army.

Q: What would you like people to know 100 years from now?

A: Well 100 years, that's a philosophical question. 100 years from now, I hope we are maintaining a lifestyle without war. But man has always been at each other, from the beginning, whether land, money, religion, power, they fight each other. I don't think that will be gone, but it will be reduced because of the threat of atomic warfare, starting right now, because that would be

the Armageddon. That'll be the end of it. We won't have to worry about my interview, will we? Because the building won't be here. And we don't want that to happen.

Q: No.

A: And we need young folks like you two, everyone here of course, me too—I'm still young—to prevent that from occurring. And hopefully it will come to pass. Done. Are you going to edit this?

Q: So it looks like our time is just about up. What is one more thing that you would like people to know 100 years from now about your time in the service?

A: I think I just answered that, though, really. I think a couple of questions overlap, you know. They ought to edit that one.

Q: What about your children?

A: Well, two sons, both live in Manhattan, where we like to go. And five grandchildren, all living in the same city. And we get to see them five times a year, yeah, five or six, yeah, times a year. The two youngest kids are in camp. And the oldest grandchildren all have graduated from college and working in New York City. They all have jobs, thank goodness. That it?

Q: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us. We are really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW